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## World Council of Churches towards Migration and Poverty<sup>1</sup>

Abstract:

The article is an outlook on the process of migration from the point of view of the World Council of Churches. It mainly examines the key document of the WCC on this subject: *The „other” is my neighbour. Developing an ecumenical response to migration*. From Christian perspective the people of God is in constant pilgrimage on this Earth, as proved by story of Israel and in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Migration considerably changes the ecclesial landscape of the country of exodus and of the country of destination. Cultural, linguistic, theological and liturgical enrichment of the countries of settlement means in the same time the impoverishment of the countries abandoned by migrants from the same values.

One of the main reasons of migration is poverty. The last however may also be a result of migration, if displacement is caused by war or persecutions. The migrants are often exposed to exploitation and unfair treatment. The diagnosis by WCC leads to issuing of a series of recommendations for the Churches: treating migrants with dignity, providing pastoral support, incorporating migrants into the parish work and liturgical celebrations, etc. By applying the rule of love of one's neighbour Christians should made every effort to welcome migrants and make them home in the local ecclesial communities.

**Keywords:** World Council of Churches, migration, poverty, ecumenism.

### Światowa Rada Kościołów wobec migracji i ubóstwa

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia spojrzenie Światowej Rady Kościołów na proces migracji. Podstawowej analizie poddany został kluczowy dokument ŚRK na ten temat: *The „other” is my neighbour. Developing an ecumenical response to migration* [„Inny” jest moim sąsiadem. Wypracowywanie ekumenicznej odpowiedzi na migrację]. Z perspektywy chrześcijańskiej Lud Boży jest na tej ziemi w nieustannym pielgrzymowaniu, czego dowodzi historia Izraela, a także życie samego Jezusa i Jego uczniów. Migracja w zasadniczy sposób zmienia krajobraz religijny zarówno kraju wyjścia, jak i kraju przeznaczenia. Kulturowe, językowe, teologiczne i liturgiczne ubogacenie kraju osiedlenia oznacza jednocześnie zubożenie w te wartości kraju opuszczonego przez emigrantów.

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Jedną z głównych przyczyn migracji jest ubóstwo. To ostatnie jednak może być także skutkiem migracji, jeśli przemieszczenie jest spowodowane wojną lub prześladowaniami. Migranci są często wystawieni na eksploatację i niesprawiedliwe traktowanie. Diagnoza postawiona przez ŚRK prowadzi do sformułowania konkretnych zaleceń dla Kościołów: traktowania migrantów z godnością, zapewnienie im wsparcia duszpasterskiego, włączenie migrantów do pracy parafialnej i celebracji liturgicznych, etc. Stosując zasadę miłości bliźniego, chrześcijanie powinni dołożyć wszelkich starań, aby przyjąć migrantów i zdomowić ich w lokalnych wspólnotach eklezjalnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Światowa Rada Kościołów, migracja, ubóstwo, ekumenizm.

## 1. Introduction

When in the beginning of 2015 the World Council of Churches (WCC) published the document on migration<sup>2</sup> (prepared for last two years), nobody could expect that Europe will soon have to face the migration crisis probably the biggest since the Second World War. The processes of migration during the centuries and millennia of existence of humanity were nothing extraordinary. We can say that from the beginning of history there is an ongoing, continuous great process of migration, what means the movement of people and groups of people leaving their original territory and populating a new one. The difference may only be in such factors as intensiveness of a given stream of migration, its direction and cause. Each time when an intensified stream of migration takes place, it causes changes in the situation of the country of exile and of the country of destination. This implies the changes in the religious situation of the territory abandoned and populated by migrants. Often enough the process of migration takes place in the feedback with the phenomenon of poverty. And poverty is in the same time the cause of migration, especially of the economic one, but also the result of migration, if it is caused by war or persecution, leading to the impoverishment in the place of hitherto residence. The migration towards a new territory may lead to an improvement of well-being, however it often stimulates other forms of poverty, e.g. outrooting of cultural background and of the way of living and practicing religion.

Although the World Council of Churches always had on the agenda the question of refugees, migrants, asylum-seekers and, internally displaced and uprooted people<sup>3</sup>, the first major attempt of the WCC to analyze the subject of migration was

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<sup>2</sup> WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, *The „other” is my neighbour. Developing an ecumenical response to migration*, Geneva: WCC Publications 2015 [= DERM].

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. TAYLOR, *Not Angels, but Agencies. The Ecumenical Response to Poverty – A Primer*, Geneva: WCC Publications 1995, 11–12: “The WCC was one of the first ecumenical organizations to work closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (...). In 1986 it helped to set up the International Ecumenical Consultative Committee on Refugees (IECCR) to improve cooperation between the WCC and its related agencies and their Roman Catholic counterparts such

the document of the Central Committee of 1995: *A Moment to Choose: Risking to Be with Uprooted People*<sup>4</sup>. After 30 years this document did not lose anything of its actuality. In the latest document: *The „other” is my neighbour. Developing an ecumenical response to migration* the WCC examines three aspects of the issue of migration. The statement comprises the analyzes of biblical and theological aspect, of ecclesial implications and of ecumenical response to migration.

## 2. Biblical approach to migration

In the pages of the Bible we can find many descriptions of migration. Leaving the homeland and moving to another place may be a consequence of listening to the call from God, as it was in the history of Abraham, or a way of escape face to cataclysm, as in the case of Noah. For Joseph sold by his brothers, leaving the father's house led to the enslavement in Egypt. The whole people of Israel experienced the displacement to the captivity in Babylon. Migration may also mean the way from captivity towards freedom, and the best example of this is the peregrination of the People of Israel from captivity in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan<sup>5</sup>. We are not short also with contemporary examples. The whole ethnic groups of Indians are put in the situation of deprivation of resources and pushed into extreme poverty threatening their existence<sup>6</sup>.

The just repartition of goods of the Earth between all the people is perhaps the biggest challenge for today's societies. In the document about migration the World Council of Churches reminds strongly, that the goods of the Earth belong to all the people and should serve to all, not only to privileged minority. The Earth and its resources created by God are the precious gift for all and no man can claim its possession for himself alone<sup>7</sup>.

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as Caritas Internationalis and the International Catholic Migration Committee (ICMC). A Global Ecumenical Network, drawing together the many and varied ministries to refugees of the WCC member churches, was formed in 1992”.

<sup>4</sup> WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, *A Moment to Choose: Risking to Be with Uprooted People*, Geneva: WCC Publications 1996.

<sup>5</sup> DERM 1–5.

<sup>6</sup> In Columbia and other countries of Amazonia the whole ethnic groups were displaced by force from the soil of their ancestors and their lands were taken by big corporations for the industrial production of oil plants. *Bilans przemocy i przesiedleń w Kolumbii*, <https://amazonicas.wordpress.com/2012/11/06/bilans-przemocy-i-przesiedlen-w-kolumbii/> (17.10.2015). This violence takes place alongside with the armed conflict about economic influence between the partisans from the National Liberation Army (ELN) and fighters from a paramilitary organization Los Urabeños. *Wysiedlenia i selektywna przemoc w Kolumbii*, <http://wolnemedi.net/polityka/wysiedlenia-i-selektywna-przemoc-w-kolumbii/> (17.10.2015).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. DERM 16.

The state of being migrant was not solely reserved to the People of Old Covenant. The escape and journey to Egypt was also the earthly fate of Jesus. The New Testament describes his journey before birth to Bethlehem, where there was no room for him (Lk 2:7), and then the escape to Egypt where he was an immigrant (Mt 2:13). Jesus described himself as someone who had nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58). By his incarnation he trespassed the frontier between heaven and earth, and in his earthly life travelled from town to town, braking the cultural and ethnical barriers<sup>8</sup>.

Like Jesus, his disciples travelled and preached the Gospel, but also had to escape the persecutions and in that way they spread the Good News. The state of migration and being dispersed (*diaspora*) are proper to the disciples of Christ. The state of being a constant pilgrim is adequate for Christians not only literally, but also as a life attitude of not being attached to any place in temporality: “We have no lasting city but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14)<sup>9</sup>.

How should we in this context perceive the “other”, what the Holy Scripture tells us about it? Already in the Old Testament we read instructions, how an immigrant coming to us should be treated: “You will treat resident aliens as though they were native-born and love them as yourself – for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt. I am Yahweh your God” (Leviticus 19:34) and “You must not exploit a poor and needy wage-earner, be he one of your brothers or a foreigner resident in your community” (Deuteronomy 24:14). Good treatment of a migrant should also be issued from the rule of love of one’s neighbour (Leviticus 19:18; Mt 19:19). It is because everyone of us has been created on God’s image, what determines his irremovable relatedness to God and also to another man. From this relatedness is issued an imperative to treat every migrant with respect and in embracing manner. The basis of such an attitude is not only the application of so called “Golden Rule”: “Treat others as you would like people to treat you” (Lk 6:31), but the conviction that every human being is equal before God. The Kingdom of God knows neither barriers nor frontiers, neither foreigners nor “others”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> DERM, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–11.

### 3. Consequences of migration for the ecclesial landscape

It is beyond all doubt that migration changes the cultural, political and of course ecclesial landscape of countries of its origin and of its destination. The most evident factor is the diminishing of a given religious community in a country of exile and the growth of the same community in a country of destination. However, the changes introduced by migration of important groups of religious communities are more complex. They introduce the changes in confessional composition of a given country by increasing cultural, linguistic, theological and liturgical pluralism in the country of destination. Correspondingly, they impoverish in the same the land abandoned by migrants. The changes introduced in the local Christian communities rest on increase of their ethnic diversity and even on formation of new, so called “migrant-churches”, composed of people uprooted of their ecclesial background.

Local Christian congregations in the countries of settlement are challenged by the way of worship, expressing faith and praying brought by migrants. This may lead to the creation of a new quality in local Churches, making their life more vibrant and colourful. Very often, however, appearance of large groups of migrants lead to creating the “national Churches” in the frame of a particular denomination<sup>11</sup>. Praying and worshiping in one’s own language seems to be here the most important factor of creating such “national Churches” and is closely related to the process of assimilation of newcomers with the local society. First generation of migrants shows rather low level of assimilation, very often because of difference in tongue, but also for cultural and racial reasons. This results in creating of a large number of migrant composed “national Churches”. Such a situation may be well observed in Roman Catholic parishes in Great Britain or in Norway, where the Masses in different languages and for different ethnic communities succeed all the Sunday, for example: Polish Mass follows the English one, Vietnamese Mass precedes the Indian Malayalam Mass etc. Christian communities of different ethnical origin do not create then one larger community, but rather coexist in the frame of shared territory or church facilities. Contemporaneously the “national Churches” do not compose one coherent system of pastoral care, but are submitted to various ecclesial structures, often simultaneously to national missions and to the local bishop or other Church authorities. The internationalism of particular denominations is then challenged by the national identities of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Christian groups and “redenominationalism and post-denominational Christian globalism occur”<sup>12</sup>.

The displaced persons in their new dwelling place will require the same as the hitherto residents. They will then seek shelter, job, justice, access to education and medical care, access to worship and participation rights, etc<sup>13</sup>. Inability to acquire these values will frame the migrants in the trap of poverty of various dimensions. The Church communities are – above all other bodies – called to bring help to those in need, but this task should be undertaken in the widest cooperation with civil services, local authorities and social organizations. Rescuing people from the degradation and humiliation caused by displacement and poverty is nothing more than accomplishing Jesus’ commandment of love of one’s neighbour. Thus the Church follows her vocation to transform this world and enters in “active partnership with God in speaking truth to powers, confronting and transforming unjust, discriminatory ideologies, cultures and realities, so that the world may be what God always wanted it to be”<sup>14</sup>. This transforming vocation of the Church to witness to the kingdom of God consists in humanization of society in its various structures and dimensions. The Church does it by affirmation of life and human dignity against all threats coming from today’s anti-Christian ideological mainstream<sup>15</sup>.

To achieve the successful transformation of the societies Church must incorporate into her missiology the commitment to include migrants into the sphere of constant pastoral and social care. This includes the fight against social injustice touching in the first place the marginalized ones, among them very often migrants. The whole mission of the Church must be “migrant-shaped” and “embrace people at the margins as fellow travellers”<sup>16</sup>. The document *The „other” is my neighbour* concludes this question with a very adequate remark: “In that perspective, it is not the inherited identities of nationalism, language and tradition, but the inclusive vision of God’s reign that brings the Church into being”<sup>17</sup>.

However, the occurrence of migrant fellow-believers in the frame of a given community cannot be perceived only as an practical or sociological phenomenon, but has its profound theological dimension. This is because migration also im-

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<sup>12</sup> DERM, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> GLOBAL PLATFORM FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION 2010, *Unity and Mission Today: Voices and visions from the Margins. Bucharest, Romania, October 4–10, 2010*, 13, in: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/global-platform-for-theological-reflection-2010> (17.10.2015).

<sup>15</sup> DERM 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

pacts on both *nature* and *mission* of the Church. According to the position taken by the World Council of Churches, being a welcoming community for all peoples and nations belongs to the nature of the Church and is a “part and parcel of the *missio Dei*”<sup>18</sup>. Migration makes the Church reshape its own image, makes her become more flexible towards the needs of newcomers, abandon static well-being. Thus introduction of new human and cultural elements creates opportunity for a local Church community to regain dynamism in living the faith and to experience more what does it mean to be a pilgrim community on this earth. Listening to the voices of migrants will inevitably lead to assigning to newcomers a role to play in the local Church communities and thus transform the ecclesial landscape also by establishing new ecumenical relations with other denominations. All the factors described above will finally make the well-established local Churches to transcend their “confessional, national and cultural boundaries”<sup>19</sup>.

Here is justified the question about the scale of migration from the point of view of its religious composition. In 2010 the total number of migrants was estimated for 215 million people<sup>20</sup>, with a supplement of 12 million of stateless and 26,4 displaced internally due to conflict<sup>21</sup>. The document *The „other” is my neighbour* quotes from the report *Faith on the Move* by Pew Research Centre (dated 2012) the numbers depicting the repartition of migration according to migrants’ religion. Among the migrants 49% are Christians, 27% are Muslims, 5% are Hindus, 3% are Buddhists, 2% are Jews, 4% are of other faith and 9% of migrants have no religious affiliation<sup>22</sup>. This statistics does not cover the large, still ongoing in 2015 migration towards Europe from Syria, Afghanistan and other countries, mainly from Middle East and Africa. One can expect that, primarily, this last migration will considerably increase the total number of displaced people and secondly, that Christians and Muslims will be once again dominant in that number.

#### **4. Migrants escaping poverty – migrants in threat of poverty**

People always looked for a better place to live, if their native dwelling place couldn’t provide necessary resources for living. Even relatively good economic

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 38–39.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

status – if unsatisfactory – may cause the search for new possibilities, sometimes far away from home.

The World Council of Churches points also at the distinction between migrants and refugees. “Majority of migrant workers are in a way economic refugees as these are from the under privileged sections of our societies – dispossessed, displaced, victimized and rendered powerless on account of the failure of the state and its mechanisms to protect and ensure opportunities for them”<sup>23</sup>. Economic poverty is a very common, but not the only reason of migration. This may also be natural disaster, environmental deterioration, rising sea level or drought. Another factor of migration is war, often civil war, or any kind of persecution. In case of war or political, religious or racial persecution even well-bread people are made to abandon their homes and leave behind all their property. Equipped with what they can carry on their shoulders such migrants become very quickly caught in the trap of poverty. Much smaller, but important group of migrants are the victims of trafficking in human beings and the clients of people-smuggling groups. The common view that migrants are people who leave their homes of their own free will should then be challenged, as it doesn’t reflect the reality of majority of men and women who migrate. Different kinds of violence, including economic one, pushes them to exile, most often for the sake of their families<sup>24</sup>.

All these abovementioned causes of migration have one of many kinds of poverty as their origin. Economic migration may have a positive side in remittance send to the countries of origin, helping the families left there and contributing to benefit of the economy of a given country. A country receiving migrants also profits from their work by the growth of national product and acquiring the necessary work force. The shadow side of the same phenomenon of migration is the change in the social structure of both sending and receiving countries, separation of families<sup>25</sup>, the so called “brain drain” of the sending countries when often the most skilled people emigrate for life<sup>26</sup>. To the dark side of the migration is added the eradication from the ecclesial community of origin and very often difficulty in assimilation with a new ecclesial community of destination.

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<sup>23</sup> WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, *Migration and Migrant Workers: Discerning Responses as Churches*, 2, in: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/migration/migration-and-migrant-workers-discerning-responses-as-churches> (17.10.2015) [further: WCC, *Migration and Migrant Workers*].

<sup>24</sup> Cf. A. JACQUES, *The Stranger Within Your Gates. Uprooted People in the World Today*, Geneva 1986, 25–26, 50–51.

<sup>25</sup> DERM 79. Cf. A. JACQUES, *The Stranger Within Your Gates*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> DERM 76. Cf. A. JACQUES, *ibid.*

The main issue of the junction of migration and poverty is the voluntariness of migration. It is the forced migration which often deprive people from their human dignity and exposes them to exploitation<sup>27</sup>. The economy of the richer countries offering jobs to migrants takes unjustly higher profit when the worker's rights are not guaranteed by the state authorities<sup>28</sup>. The exploitation of migrant workers may rest on driving down the salaries and lack of safety of work<sup>29</sup>. Such unjust enrichment makes the rich more rich to the detriment of poor and deepens inequalities in a society and between countries. Thus the process of globalization brings some resources to the sending countries by remittances sent to them by migrant workers but in the same time aggravates distance between poor and rich countries.

Escaping the poverty in the country of origin migrants are very often in threat of becoming a second class citizens condemned to worse condition of work and payment. This happens where the state authorities are not able or not interested to provide the fair law for all. Turning the blind eye on the black market of work is the usual practice of many emerging economic powers and even of well established economies<sup>30</sup>. Unfair, diminished pay doesn't allow the employee to get their families join them and thus the separation becomes permanent<sup>31</sup>. The lack of executing the fair law of work or lack of fairness in the application of law to migrants only doesn't allow them to reach the standard equal to the citizens protected by law. The circle is closed and the trap of poverty locked. However, the ability of the Church to deal with poverty has direct implications for her credibility, what clearly showed Coenraad Boerma analyzing the situation of the poor in Europe<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, a special program<sup>33</sup> of the World Council of Churches studying the question of poverty, wealth and ecology reminds about the uncompromising option of the Church towards the poor: "Our faith compels us to seek justice, to witness to the presence of God and to be part of the lives and struggles of people made weak and vulnerable by structures and cultures – women, children, people living in poverty in both urban and rural areas, Indigenous Peoples,

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<sup>27</sup> WCC, *Migration and Migrant Workers*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> DERM 81.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>30</sup> WCC, *Migration and Migrant Workers*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> C. BOERMA, *The Poor Side of Europe. The Church and the (New) Poor of Western Europe*, Geneva: WCC Publications 1989.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Economy of Life. Linking Poverty, Wealth and Ecology*, R.R. MSHANA, A. PERALTA (ed.), Geneva: WCC Publication 2015.

racially oppressed communities, people with disabilities, Dalits, forced migrant workers, refugees and religious ethnic minorities”<sup>34</sup>.

## 5. The call for the response of the Churches to migration

The World Council of Churches does not stop half-way on depicting the existing situation of migrants and migration. A good diagnosis is followed by a series of recommendations for Churches and Church communities. What kind of reaction a particular Church should take not only face to migration as a phenomenon, but here and now face to migrants: people knocking the church door and requiring pastoral care? First of all, the Churches “should not treat the migrant workers as desperate dependants like the way the wider society does but make them feel that they are human beings, and provide pastoral support whenever possible”<sup>35</sup>. Parishes, as places safe, inclusive and justice-orientated should realize deeper ecumenism as well as intercultural and interreligious dialogue<sup>36</sup>. It is also desirable that Churches ministers were prepared, compassionate and ready to accompany migrants in need<sup>37</sup>. The same and even more is required from ecumenical organizations which should become “sanctuaries of support and hope”<sup>38</sup>. Thanks to their structure transgressing the borders the ecumenical organizations are able to establish links between the sending countries and receiving ones and thus become a real platform of support for the most vulnerable and take “global ecumenical action in defense of their rights”<sup>39</sup>.

Recommendations are also given for liturgical celebrations. Apart of introducing the subject of migration into the sermons, studies, prayers and Bible readings, it is desirable to organize days of prayer and actions related to the situation of migrants, also the memorial services for the victims of migration. All this should allow the Church to be an inclusive community and extend its horizontal dimension alongside with the horizontal one<sup>40</sup>. Besides the stress on “inclusivity” in the World Council of Churches documents there is a strong call for public advocacy

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<sup>34</sup> WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, *Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call to Action*, in: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/neoliberal-paradigm/agape-call-for-action-2012> (17.10.2015).

<sup>35</sup> WCC, *Migration and Migrant Workers*, 10a.

<sup>36</sup> DERM 44.

<sup>37</sup> WCC, *Migration and Migrant Workers*, 10a,b,d,e.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 11d.

<sup>39</sup> WCC, *Migration and Migrant Workers*, 11e.

<sup>40</sup> DERM 46–47.

on migration issues and witness, which should include “a public critique of structures and practices that further and contribute to the ‘othering’, the discrimination and the violation of human beings, particularly of those on the move”<sup>41</sup>. Added to this the Churches should strengthen not only pastoral, but also “political response with regard to migration, justice and human rights”<sup>42</sup>. All these recommendations are primarily addressed to the Churches, however also the civil, societal and faith-based organizations are also the addressees of the WCC documents, as the Churches should join hands with the above-mentioned in the fight with the causes of migration which are war, poverty and climate change<sup>43</sup>.

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Social issues are one of the main fields of interest of the World Council of Churches. When fighting for the world more just, the WCC tries to give to the process of globalization more Christian and more human face. Taking care of poor and displaced belongs to the deeds of Christian mercy. Like no other organization, the WCC – being the largest ever Christian forum – has the potential to influence Church and civil authorities. While rich countries egoistically defend their life standards, World Council of Churches points at these parts of humanity which are deprived of necessary rights, means of leaving and even human dignity. We can only hope that the voice of Christian Churches gathered in WCC will be listened to and heard. Thus the unjust social structures and people’s attitude towards the poor and uprooted people can be changed and our world transformed into better place to live for all.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

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